LEWISTON TRIBUNE
Saturday

Budding engineers compete

By JOEL MILLS
of the Tribune
MOSCOW -- Some of the most destructive war machines in history were unleashed this week at the University of Idaho.

Fortunately for the university, however, the machines were scaled-down versions of their medieval counterparts and used three-pound medicine balls for projectiles, not 300-pound stones.

Plus, the young engineers who designed and built them were having a bit of trouble with their weapons.

"Ours was really strong, but it didn't work," said 17-year-old Elise Overgaard of Weiser about her team's trebuchet, a catapult-like device that uses a counterweight rather than a spring to propel its throwing arm. "I like how we designed it, it's just not working like we wanted."

Overgaard and 28 other high school students were participating in the 37th annual Junior Engineering, Math and Science Summer Camp at the UI. And although her team's trebuchet, dubbed Gnar Kill, didn't work at first, they were eventually tied for the lead in the end-of-camp competition.

Gnar Kill was even hitting the bull's-eye on the small plywood targets placed 75 feet away on the Dan O'Brien Track west of the Kibbie Dome. And although they lost the fling-off with rival team Thor, at least it was on a technicality.

"It's kind of crap, but whatever," said Salt Lake City resident Gavin Lichthardt, 17, of Gnar Kill's disqualification for adding extra counterweight outside their concrete-filled five-gallon bucket.

But the object of becoming medieval marauders wasn't to win a competition, said Camp Director Jean Teasdale, but to get the kids excited about science and college.

"The fun thing about this project is the kids get to do something hands-on," Teasdale said as the teams were lining up their trebuchets to try for best distance. "Even a lot of the boys have never used power tools before."

And Teasdale was encouraged that this year the girls in camp outnumbered the boys.

"I'm hoping what it says is more girls are interested in engineering, and girls who come to this camp will go on to careers in engineering," she said. "There just aren't enough women in the field."

Teasdale, an assistant dean in the College of Engineering, said about one in five engineers nationwide are women. "The UI has been hovering at about 12 percent for years," she added.

The students spend the first week of camp modeling their trebuchets on a computer, then building a one-foot-high mockup. The second week is spent building, testing and competing with the bigger version.

But while the camp revolved around the trebuchet, students took classes on leadership, toured the UI's facilities and learned about civil and chemical engineering.

"By having it interdisciplinary, we expose the students to a variety of engineering techniques," Teasdale said.

"The thing is, they don't even realize they're learning physics," adds Leah Andrews, a spokeswoman for the NASA Idaho Space Grant Consortium, which helps put on the camp.

"I thought it was really cool to see the labs, the different kinds of engineering and the different directions I can go," said Overgaard as the competition wound down. "And I liked meeting all these people and finding out they're as nerdy as me."

And she has big plans for when she gets home this week. She and the four other Weiser natives at the camp are going to build a trebuchet big enough to hurl themselves into the local reservoir.

"I promise, we'll get there."

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